



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Experiments in aural attention

Citation for published version:

Collins, R 2022, 'Experiments in aural attention: Lingering longer & listening away', *Journal for Artistic Research*, vol. 27. <https://doi.org/10.22501/jar.1248288>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

<https://doi.org/10.22501/jar.1248288>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Journal for Artistic Research

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Experiments in Aural Attention: Listening Away & Linger Longer

Rebecca Collins

Tab Abstract

Experiment I: Aural + Orientation = Aurientation? Emulates the experience of a fictional gallery-goer who encounters sound installation, *This is for You (Don't Treat it like a Telephone)* (2012). This piece was developed at the advanced centre for performance and scenography studies (a.pass) in Brussels and aims to consider how sound and the voice shape our orientation when mediated through objects. *Experiment II: Vibrant Practice* details the process undergone for creating *Listening to Water* (2013), a site-specific investigation into ancient well sites located in Powys and Ceredigion, two counties in Mid West Wales. The work, made in collaboration with Jane Lloyd-Francis and Naomi Heath, considers how a turn towards site via a process of tuning in to the Welsh landscape can bring attention to overlooked aspects of our environment. The exposition puts forward lingering longer and listening away as potential means to remain with non-semantic possibilities, resisting the tendency to know immediately or to classify — to get lost, albeit momentarily in a more messy moment of being.

[Title Page](#)

[\[video\]Main Body Abstract](#)

'Experiments in Aural Attention: Listening Away & Linger Longer'

[Rebecca Collins](#)

~~*Experiments in Aural Attention: Listening Away & Linger Longer* details two instances of practice-based research, which explore how to cultivate sensibilities towards our aural capacities.~~

Introduction: Experiments in Aural Attention

Figure 1: I seek to explore and expand upon the potential of non-semantic, affectful relations occurring between bodies, objects, and phenomena.

Figure 2: This approach seeks to interrogate the act of listening rather than merely stage its aural objects.

A renewed interest in sound, identified by contemporary art theorist Jim Drobnick as the 'sonic turn' (2004), has attempted to address the absence of an aural equivalent to 'visual studies' across the arts and humanities. Within theatre and performance studies sound, until recently, as described by Patrice Pavis in the preface to *Theatre Noise*, 'tended to serve the visual arrangement or design' (2011: xi), thereby neglecting the full potential of the use of sound as non-semantic material, its affectfulness, atmospheric properties, and aesthetic implications. Audio theorists Sanne Krogh Groth and Holger Schulze, in their introduction to *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sound*, point to how the Futurists and Dadaists, despite differences in their approaches and ideas, were united in their insistence on sound for this very reason (2020). ~~The two practical experiments detailed in this exposition emerge in the context of a renewed interest in aurality apparent across performance, contemporary art,~~

~~and sound studies.~~ In the exposition, I seek to explore and expand upon the potential of non-semantic, affectful relations occurring between bodies, objects, and phenomena.

The extent to which aural relations influence the trajectory of bodies through space has been taken up in recent years by a number of curators keen to interrogate critical listening practices. Barbara London, curator of 'Soundings: A Contemporary Score' (2013) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), was keen 'not to use headphones' and therefore developed each installation as a 'tuned environment' to emphasize the experience of the works and their potential to envelop the gallery-goer. By recognizing that 'listening is about focussing', London aimed to encourage visitors to listen, not just to hear. Similarly, curator Sam Belinfante, for 'Listening' (2014), commissioned by the Hayward Touring Curatorial Open, aimed to emulate a sense of aural attention by choreographing the visitors' experience towards the works in the exhibition. Belinfante used motorized technology to stagger the aural activation of the works, thereby encouraging gallery-goers to be led by their ears. This approach sought to interrogate the act of listening rather than merely stage its aural objects. Both Belinfante and London's curatorial approaches allude to structures of aural attention and an awareness of sound's potential to generate aural space within a gallery environment, ~~indicating a greater awareness of, and interest in aurality.~~

The aural-as-encountered informs the work of theatre studies scholar George Home-Cook who, prompted by the work of political philosopher Don Ihde, recognizes that phenomenology needs to be 'practiced' (Home-Cook citing Ihde 2011: 99). In highlighting the necessity to engage in the 'rigours and particularities of phenomenological description' (ibid.,) Home-Cook grounds his methodology in his experience as a 'listening spectator'. Home-Cook makes use of this to attend to the works of contemporary theatre makers e.g. Robert Lepage and Complicité to understand further and develop theoretical frameworks on perception gleaned from philosopher Alva Noë and P. Sven Arvidson's concept of the attentional sphere.⁴ Home-Cook's methodology is useful for recognizing the necessity for an embodied, phenomenological approach to thinking and writing about aural attention within the theatrical environment. ~~Building on Home-Cook's work, I aurally attend to two practical experiments. In doing so, I cultivate a writing practice that allows an understanding of aural attention to emerge.~~

Building on Home-Cook's work, I explore, via practical means, the limits of aural engagement in two distinct contexts roughly divided into plastic/sculpture (experiment I) and site/environment (experiment II). I investigate, through these two works and their associated creative processes, how aurality directs our attention towards certain objects, is organized through horizontal, vibrational relations, and how it can be discerned in an attitude shaped by attention or orientation which shifts in response to certain events, objects, and phenomena. Both works featured in my exhibition 'Experiments in Aural

⁴ Arvidson's sphere of attention recognizes three dimensions, namely '*thematic attention* (attention in the dimension of theme or focus), the *context of attention* (consciousness in the dimension of the thematic context) and the *margin of attention* (consciousness in the dimension of margin as halo and horizon)' (Arvidson 2006: 1 italics in original). Home-Cook relates Arvidson's theory to listening in order to construct his own theory of theatrical attending.

Attention: Linger Longer & Listening Away' (2015) at Aberystwyth School of Art.² ~~Flyers from the exhibition are included on this page (see Figures 1 and 2) and further images are embedded throughout. Video documentation from the exhibition features below as an initial means for aurientating the reader toward the form of attention I aim to articulate within this exposition. Throughout the text I switch between creative and critical writing, made evident by a shift in font colour (from black to blue), to locate aural attention as a slow, lingering encounter positioning listening (and the listener) as agentic whereby the moment of encounter with another person, place, or thing might be expanded or exhausted.~~

Listening away or lingering longer?

Figure 3: I am interested in how a motivated phenomenology, as necessarily affective, might enable us to experience the world in a different order, thereby purporting distinct sensible modes of being.

Figure 4: I aim to make tangible that which might be at work in the production, transmission, and mutation of affective tonality.

Figure 5: I aim to draw the reader in close.

My central concern in this se exposition is to appropriate the function of listening and our ability to tune in as a challenge to the specific given order in which we experience the world, or more specifically, in relation to what philosopher Jacques Rancière designates as 'the distribution of the sensible' (2006: 85). Rancière uses 'the distribution of the sensible' in an attempt to capture our collective environment, its contents, people, and places so as to describe how they are rendered seemingly stable and known. According to Rancière, what gets divided and how is determined by a pre-established mode of perception, a sensible order, based on what is deemed visible and audible. In addition to this, Rancière also includes what can be 'said, thought, made, or done' (2006: 85). In cultivating attention towards aural attention, I argue that our focus can fall on what can be made audible that would otherwise lie outside the 'distribution of the sensible'. The main essence of my enquiry is foregrounded in sound's potential to take us away from, and beyond, apparent given stability, an approach in accordance with Maurice Blanchot's concept of literature, whose aim is 'to interrupt the purposeful steps we are always taking toward a deeper understanding and surer grasp on things' (Blanchot 1982: 3 cited in Shapiro 2013: xv).

I am interested in how a motivated phenomenology, as necessarily affective, might enable us to experience the world in a different order, thereby purporting distinct sensible modes of being. Accordingly, throughout this se exposition, I re-interpret comparative literature scholar Rei Terada's concept of the figure of the phenomenophile and phenomenophilia as invitations to develop works that both in their object format and in their documentation enable the investigation of aural attention. In *Looking Away* (2009), Terada develops the

²~~The exhibition formed part of my practice-based PhD submission conducted at Aberystwyth University supervised by Prof. Adrian Kear and Dr Andrew Filmer (funded by APRS). The exhibition ran from 8 to 25 June 2015 (see Figures 1 and 2 for flyer images). I have continued to work extensively on experiment III, *Stolen Voices*. This is an exploration of eavesdropping, site-specific performance, and fiction in collaboration with artist researcher Johanna Linsley. See Collins & Linsley (2019), Collins & Linsley (2019) and Collins & Linsley (forthcoming).~~

'phenomenophile' (ibid.: 18) to describe a figure who prefers to look away at the coloured shadow on the wall, or who wishes to linger longer in looking, exhausting the semantic value of what is seen. In re-visiting debates on appearance and reality, Terada highlights the difficulties of dealing with 'the given'. By suggesting a phenomenophilic mode of being that promulgates a sense of lingering in perception, Terada seeks to avoid acceptance of the world 'as is'. She posits the possibility of 'looking away' as an alternative to the coercive imposition to know and to classify. ~~In doing so Terada, challenges Kantian aesthetic ideals. According to Terada, in the *Critique of Judgement*, fleeting and undefined perceptive encounters do not feature as they do not uphold the for-singular ideals of commonality and beauty. To counter this Terada indicates the appeal of perceptions that cannot be shared, and therefore also not appropriated. and commonly shared ideas of beauty.~~ In Terada's description, persistent looking stems from dissatisfaction with the classificatory nature of the world, highlighting a reluctance to endorse what is perceived in words. The act of phenomenophilia and Terada's figure, 'the phenomenophile', promulgate an experience outside what is directly available, using selective inattention such as a look away to avoid what lies directly in front or what is made directly accessible. Though Terada's discussion of the term is framed in relation to Coleridge's preoccupation with phenomenal spectra (2009: 6), I adopt her term and apply it both critically and practically throughout the exposition.³ I propose the figure of the phenomenophile as key to thinking through the structure of sonorous relations, as such a strategy purports a counter-aesthetic ~~and, by engaging the imagination,~~ suggesting the possibility of 'doing things differently' from the prescribed norm (ibid.: 8). ~~appealing against the Kantian aesthetic of the world 'as is' or affirming positions of commonality.~~

In attempting to articulate and draw attention to that which is just beyond reach of our perceptive capabilities, or what audio theorist Steve Goodman describes as the 'not yet audible' (2010: xvi), by practising and writing through instances of aural attention I aim to make tangible that which might be at work in the production, transmission, and mutation of affective tonality. My enquiry pursues examples of such occurrences taking place even at a micro-level. As philosopher Michel Serres states, 'practically all matter, particularly flesh, vibrates and conducts sound' (2008: 47). I adopt a critical agential position that locates a horizontal understanding between human and non-human relations. I make use of political theorist Jane Bennett's argument in *Vibrant Matter* (2010) that agency is located in all matter. Expounding a Deleuzian-inspired sense of horizontality across all beings and things, Bennett defines life as 'an interstitial field of non-personal, ahuman forces, flows, tendencies, and trajectories' (ibid.: 61). Though Bennett's argument, as she herself admits, overemphasizes the active powers issuing form to non-subjects to an extent that almost begins to marginalize human agency, she is able to highlight 'what is typically cast in the shadow: the material agency or effectivity of nonhumans or not-quite-human things' (ibid.: ix). For my own purposes within this investigation, instead of considering such relations as equally contributing agentic forces, I contemplate how affective forces residing in seemingly

³~~I make reference to Rei Terada's work in 'Aural Attunement is a form of performative writing used to write about nonhuman affective relations in Emma Bennett's Slideshow Birdshow (2013)' (2021). In the article I use Terada's concepts to develop a mode of performative writing which I describe as 'aural attunement' to write about the experience of attending a piece of live performance work.—~~

inert matter, e.g. objects or things, when turned towards, through either a physical positioning of the body, or by adopting an attitude that allows itself to be disorientated from habitual forms, a state of mutual attunement can be reached.

By experimenting with distinct writing registers I aim to draw the reader in close, encouraging them to linger longer within the pages of this exposition, extending the moment of perception as attention is suspended allowing interpretation to deploy itself in multiple dimensions, principally between the process of developing the work and encounters as gallery-goer / itinerant artist with a view to ultimately develop an understanding of sonorous relations. ~~Images on this page and those featured throughout the exposition were taken during my exhibition 'Experiments in Aural Attention: Listening Away & Linger Longer' (2015) and aim to be suggestive of this mode of being.~~

This is for You

From the boutique-filled Dansaert neighbourhood in the city centre of Brussels, I head South towards the Brussels-Charleroi Canal. On either side I notice small, expensive shops. I'm drawn to 'Attitude', a bohemian flower shop and 'Joya Brussels', an avant-garde jeweller selling silver trinkets. The street lighting diminishes, I press on. I pass 'Asian Green Chilli Foods', a grocery store brimming with fresh fruit and vegetables. I cross the Chaussée de Gand bridge. The buildings on this side are worn, some derelict holding visible evidence of the previous intense industrial period. I overhear a conversation in Arabic. A police siren sounds. A car, windows down, with the track 'It's a Sin' by The Pet Shop Boys, pumps full volume.

As I walk, the acoustic environment prompts me to think about sound, relationships, space, and time. I read somewhere how a relationship grounded in the sonorous contaminates spatial and temporal contingencies offering possible connections and links between and in one space and the next, between, in, and through one person and another.

I turn my attention to how sound situates me within these specific streets of the city of Brussels. I am sensitive to how the sounds I hear influence my feelings.

A lone female voice with guitar accompaniment wafts from the window of a third floor apartment. I'm reminded of Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero who notes, 'the voice is always, irremediably relational' (2005: 177). I feel drawn to her song. An indiscernible voice whispers 'not yet', I press on.

I arrive at the building, climb the metal fire escape stairs on the outside passing the ground floor, home to an events company brandishing the slogan, 'the perfect location for your creation'. I continue to the fourth floor where views of the city of Brussels, in particular the shiny top of the spherical structure of the Atomium, constructed in the late 1950s for the 'World's Fair Exposition' (Expo 58) catches my eye. Traversing a grey painted hallway, I enter a semi-lit studio, the floor creaks sending echoes around the vast open space. Not the creak of a haunted house, a creak more akin to a worn-out warehouse, an overloaded and overworked dense chipboard flooring. I pause. A vast space full of redundant objects

stretches before me: an unstable wooden seated sculpture of sorts, several large loudspeakers, wooden chairs, tables, a well-used sofa, a very small blue leather jacket (almost too small for anybody) and a mouldy coffee cup. I look at the space around me, which of all the objects in the room might be a sound installation?

Figure 6: I am in front of an odd collection of leftover materials.

Audio 1: Someone is here

Sound engulfs, immerses, envelops me; it lends itself to interiority and intimacy as it is essentially mobile and contemporaneous, it arrives, attacks and surprises. Sound theorist Brandon LaBelle reminds me, sound ‘explicitly brings bodies together’ (2010: xxiv); it is a porous phenomenon connecting spaces and people.

=

I turn my head as my ear, struck by the sound of voices in the air, hears sounds emanating from a collection of objects; words, tones, obscure shapes and shadows become audible. Unsure of what, or who I am hearing, I am drawn away from the fourth floor vistas into relation with the voices.

Figure 7: The metal opening is dark and obscure inside.

Audio 2: You are irreplaceable.

In the half-light I make out the reflection of a corrugated metal tube. I see fragments of bodies; the legs of a person from the waist down sitting on a black office chair, their head obscured by a blue plastic baby’s bath suspended, almost invisibly, by fishing wire.

I draw closer, some voices sound further away than others. I can’t see any faces or locate the exact source of the sound. French film theorist and composer Michel Chion (1999) describes this effect, when voice and image do not match, as the acousmetre. Chion cites examples from cinema, such as the booming voice of the wizard in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), only to be revealed later as a little man with a large microphone. Though an effect we have now become widely accustomed to, in his seminal publication *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (1993), Chion notes how this is used to assign power and omnipotence, the all-seeing voice. In this case, however, the concealment of the source does not give a sense of omnipotence, more a sense of extended concealment. I cannot see exactly how the voice is being channelled, my perceptive capacities are sustained, my obligation to endorse the world through language is extended through an inability to articulate the experience, thereby expanding and deferring the space of spectatorship. I linger.

I draw even closer. I see someone’s legs, their upper body is wrapped in foam, they are concealed by a plastic shower curtain patterned with small blue, red, and yellow polka dots.

=

Figure 8: It reaches up toward the ceiling and splits into several red-ribbed plastic pipes.

Audio 3: Help me.

I am in front of an odd collection of leftover materials, far from their habitual function: a baby’s bath, a yoga mat, a shower curtain, an upside-down chair faking it as a sound

umbrella, a piece of green carpet too small to occupy any room, an upside down bag, and a broken unzipped sleeping bag.

Towards the centre of the space there is a metal opening, I am drawn to it, I rest my ear on the edge of the corrugated material. I feel the heat of voices, a human warmth that touches me on the ear, not like a warm breeze but something more rancid, a wet warmth fragrant with coffee and cigarettes.

The metal opening is dark and obscure inside, like the opening to a mouth or a cave. I look deep into it and try to trace the origin of the voices; my gaze is met with a void. There are some pieces of corrugated iron attached to its sides that open like a set of lips. I follow the tube with my eyes; it is almost like a throat. It reaches up toward the ceiling and splits into several red-ribbed plastic pipes. Again, I trace it with my eye, each tube seems to feed into one of the areas of amassed objects in the room.

A black boot from under a green hillock like carpet construction moves backwards, a shin, a knee, another black boot, shin, knee, thigh emerges, waist, chest, arms, head. I draw closer to the area the boot emerged from. On all fours I push the flap of carpet aside and poke my head in, I pull myself inside by putting pressure on my elbows and enter into a kind of dark black box. I rest my upper body on the soft material consisting of duvets and foam, I bring my knees to my chest to make space for myself and lie for a while, completely motionless, comforted by the material surrounding me. It is almost completely dark and there is a strong smell of rubber.

'This is for you', a plastic tube is handed to me.

Figure 10: There is no task or instruction.

Holding the plastic tube, I press it to my ear to hear the fragmented sounds and voices of others. The tube vibrates and becomes warm in my hand. I move the opening to my mouth unsure of what to say.

There is no task or instruction.

I cannot see the faces of my interlocutors suspending any ethical responsibility to make sense or construct a relation. I am unsure of what I might want to say, my self-interest suppressed in this setting.

My attention is focused on the possibility to either speak or to listen; I cannot do both simultaneously but must choose between one and the other. If I speak into the tube, I cannot hear the sound of my own voice. I put words out into the tube with little or no notion of where they go, what they might sound like, who they might affect and how. I speak into the space in front of me. I listen, sounds emerge from the red plastic tube in my hand. I listen. I hear my own heartbeat and become increasingly aware of the space my body takes up. There is no pressure to participate or to speak.

I linger inside the structure, content to receive and emit sounds, using my voice as an instrument, without any particular need or want.

Figure 11: We are a shifting sonorous landscape.

Audio 4: The voices grow in volume

I move the rough-edge of the plastic tube to my mouth and whisper something about the dark. I move it back to my ear and hear someone asking if I am alright repeatedly. Someone else answers over my words. I send out a 'help me' request in a voice slightly higher pitched than usual and receive what sounds like a national railway announcement in return.

A low hum [...] mmmmmhhh, a low hummmmmmmh.

I give up trying to communicate or to speak to anyone. I feel the tube vibrate, I draw my mouth close adding my own voice to the vibrations.

The voices grow in volume, the pitch alters to accommodate my sound.

The hum grows and alters; it carves a shifting relational landscape between us, covering areas we can negotiate together without a pre-agreed trajectory to follow. It is 'no longer a question of intercepting a sound and decoding or interpreting it, but rather of responding to a unique voice that signifies nothing but itself' (Cavarero 2005: 7). We join together in sound, in what Philosopher Adriana Cavarero describes as 'the maintenance of a relation that communicates no other meaning than the relation itself' (ibid.: 195). There is no intention to communicate or to make sense. We are not only connected through sound but also via the red-ribbed plastic tube vibrating in our hands. We are a shifting sonorous landscape that puts us in common outside the voicing of language verging on 'dangerously bodily, if not seductive or quasi-animal' (ibid.: 13). A space for being opens, a space for vocal theatre that as soon as the mouth closes, is gone.

Experiment I: Aural + Orientation = Aurientation?

Muffled echoic sounds, distant voices

'Someone is here?'

Footsteps, ruffling of plastic materials

'Ooooooooooooooooooooo'

Scraping of a ribbed plastic tube.

'Ouhuu, bahuoooooooooooo'

Inaudible response.

(High-pitched) 'bawooowoowoowoowo'

'Who are you?'

(low-pitched) 'hmm hmm hm hm hmmm' (inaudible)

'Q tal? What do you see?'

'I see ghosts'
'Idle power, trust keys, peel'
'Where are you?'
Loud sounds of breathing in.
'Go on, gooo on'
Whistling.
'First to base'
'Call to the middle of the space'
'How is it in there?'
'Dark and warm and impossible'
(loud and close) 'Very cosy I would say'
'What?'
'Somebody's with you?'
'No I'm all alone'
(loud and close) 'Can you hear me?'
'Yes'
'Where are you?'
(loud and close) 'I'm in the cosy corner.'
'My corner is also cosy'
'This is too warm'
'How cosy?'
'Very cosy actually, I mean [...]'
'Are you sitting?'

Figure 12: I construct a fictional figure.

This is for You (Don't Treat it like a Telephone) is an installation piece I created during a three-month research residency from September to December 2012 at a.pass, an artistic and educational research environment in Brussels. The installation was developed following a series of explorations into the sonorous properties of ~~various~~ materials and their relationship to the voice and communication.

Early trials for the project included yoghurt pot telephones and funnel devices connected by plastic tubing (~~see Figures 7 and 8~~). These were inspired by research conducted on ear trumpets, early hearing devices, and listening/speaking tubes. Further research was undertaken into the construction of DIY sound booths via a series of exploratory workshops with artists in attendance at a.pass, ~~referred to as~~ titled 'Sonorous Dens'. ~~The objective of these sessions was to explore how material found within the studio environs, material, such as furniture, and objects within the studio environs alongside items purchased at DIY stores could be used to construct acoustic environments.~~

Once the '~~S~~sonorous ~~D~~dens' had been constructed, a series of voice and speech exercises were trialled. Then, a discussion was held to consider the experiential aspect of the constructed environment. A series of reports were subsequently produced to document the materials used in the construction, feelings evoked from speaking inside each of the spaces, and the sensations of being spoken to through the material construction. In the final phase, four '~~S~~sonorous ~~D~~dens', chosen for their distinct experiential properties, were connected using corrugated red plastic tubing typically used in construction work. A more open listening/announcement area made from a corrugated metal tube formed a further part of the piece (~~see Figure 9 for a sketch of the sonorous dens~~). ~~Three speech experiments were subsequently undertaken with invited artists.⁴ These had a one-hour duration, participants spent ten minutes in each of the constructed spaces and were instructed to speak or make sounds in response to the environment they were in.~~ The installation was reconstructed for 'Experiments in Aural Attention: Lingering Longer & Listening Away (2015). ~~Images from the installation feature throughout this exposition and video documentation can be found in the introduction.~~

'You are irreplaceable'

Sounds of plastic tubes moving.

(Breathing)

'This place'

'Hello'

(Singing) 'We are only yesterday...'

'Oh'

'Haha'

Sounds of plastic tubes moving.

'Is there someone new?'

'Haha, yeah'

'OK'

'Ah'

'I recognize the voice'

'No'

'Yeah'

'So ...'

'Are you on the left side or on the right side?'

'Um, I have no idea'

'Middle?'

~~⁴I am grateful to the artists who encountered the installation and whose voices feature on the audio recordings. These include Sylvain Boisvert, Charo Calvo, Alessandra Coppola, Dolores, Robin Amanda Creswell Faure, Fleur Khani, Nibia Pastrana Santiago, Carlotta Scioldo, Bart van den Eynde, and Dianne Weller.~~

'I'm in, in something and not sure'

'Ah, ok'

'Hey?'

'I just see flowers when I look down and up, actually I can't look up'

Sound of plastic tubes moving.

Sound of creaking floorboards.

'Ohhhhhhhhhhh'

'Is there somebody else?'

Sound of creaking.

'No I'm all alone'

'HEY'

'Oh yeah, there is somebody'

'HEY, hehehe'

'Ah, yeah'

'HEEEOOOO'

Figure 13: I press it to my ear.

In this exposition ~~Here~~, by making use of documentation from the residency period which includes diary extracts, drawings, interview material, photographic documentation, audio recordings, reports, and blog entries, I construct a fictional figure, an imagined gallery-goer, who attempts to embody Terada's concept of the phenomenophile (2009). This fictional gallery-goer, ~~whose text appears in blue-coloured font~~, travels from Brussels city centre to Molenbeek-Saint-Jean, one of the nineteen municipalities just West of the central region, to encounter the installation.

Extracts transcribed from recordings made during the aforementioned speech experiments appear in text format on images alongside audio documentation. Please use the scroll bar to read these sections. The creative writing in the body of this section appears in blue. This register attempts to embody the idea of 'au/orientation', a concept I am using to explore how aurality directs our attention toward certain objects, influencing our experience of urban and interior spaces, events, and encounters.

'Help me, help.'

(Low tone) 'ooohaaahhoohhhh'

Scratching sounds.

'It is kind of confusing.'

'Help!'

'How are you doing today?'

(Low tone continues throughout)

'ooohaaahhoohhahhh'

Speaking over each other.

'I'm very very very busy. I'm really very very busy.'

'Help me. Help.'

Scratching sounds of plastic tube.

'Tttttttt'

Scratching sounds of plastic tube intensifies.

'Help. It's black. Help me. Help me, please'

(Low tone fills the space.)

(Formal tone) 'I'm sorry but I am just really, really very very busy. Very, very busy. You just happened to call me in a very very busy moment and I really can't help.'

'Tttttttt'

'Not today, not today thank you.'

'Que os pasais?'

'Not today.'

Sounds of plastic tubes scraping.

'This is the BBC home service broadcasting from...'

'Como es tampoco...'

'I need you'

HHMMMMPPPHMMMM

'Y el espiritu santo [...] Vamonos para casa [...] esas persoas'

Hm hm hm ha hm hm ha.

Figure 14: I move the opening to my mouth unsure what to say.

My definition of orientation is informed by queer theorist Sara Ahmed's use of the word as she, motivated by questions of sexual orientation, investigates 'how bodies take shape through tending toward objects that are reachable' (2006: 543). Ahmed's queer phenomenological approach is useful as I adopt the term to describe a position we might take up toward objects, spaces, beings, and in turn, how our time and space might be commanded in relation to aurality.

~~Extracts transcribed from recordings made during the aforementioned speech experiments appear in text format on images alongside audio documentation. Please use the scroll bar to read these sections. The creative writing in the body of this section appears in blue. This register attempts to embody the idea of 'au/orientation', a concept I am using to explore how aurality directs our attention toward certain objects, influencing our experience of urban and interior spaces, events, and encounters.~~

~~Muffled echoic sounds, distant voices~~

~~'Someone is here?'~~

~~Footsteps, ruffling of plastic materials~~

~~'Ooooooooooooooooooooo'~~

~~Scraping of a ribbed plastic tube.~~

~~'Ouhuu, bahuoooooooooooo'~~

~~Inaudible response.~~

~~(High pitched) 'bawooooowooooowoooo'~~

~~'Who are you?'~~

~~(low pitched) 'hmm hmm hm hm hmmm' (inaudible)~~

~~'Q tal? What do you see?'~~

~~'I see ghosts'~~

~~'Idle power, trust keys, peel'~~

~~'Where are you?'~~

~~Loud sounds of breathing in.~~

~~'Go on, go on'~~

~~Whistling.~~

~~'First to base'~~

~~'Call to the middle of the space'~~

~~'How is it in there?'~~

~~'Dark and warm and impossible'~~

~~(loud and close) 'Very cosy I would say'~~

~~'What?'~~

~~'Somebody's with you?'~~

~~'No I'm all alone'~~

~~(loud and close) 'Can you hear me?'~~

~~'Yes'~~

~~'Where are you?'~~

~~(loud and close) 'I'm in the cosy corner.'~~

~~'My corner is also cosy'~~

~~'This is too warm'~~

~~'How cosy?'~~

~~'Very cosy actually, I mean [...].'~~

~~'Are you sitting?'~~

~~From the boutique-filled Dansaert neighbourhood in the city centre of Brussels, I head south towards the Brussels-Charleroi Canal. On either side I notice small, expensive shops.~~

~~I'm drawn to 'Attitude', a bohemian flower shop and 'Joya Brussels', an avant-garde jeweller selling silver trinkets. The street lighting diminishes, I press on. I pass 'Asian Green Chilli Foods', a grocery store brimming with fresh fruit and vegetables. I cross the Chaussée de Gand bridge. The buildings on this side are worn, some derelict holding visible evidence of the previous intense industrial period. I overhear a conversation in Arabic. A police siren sounds. A car, windows down, with the track 'It's a Sin' by The Pet Shop Boys, pumps full volume.~~

~~As I walk, the acoustic environment prompts me to think about sound, relationships, space, and time. I read somewhere how a relationship grounded in the sonorous contaminates spatial and temporal contingencies offering possible connections and links between and in one space and the next, between, in, and through one person and another.~~

~~I turn my attention to how sound situates me within these specific streets of the city of Brussels. I am sensitive to how the sounds I hear influence my feelings.~~

~~A lone female voice with guitar accompaniment wafts from the window of a third floor apartment. I'm reminded of Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero who notes, 'the voice is always, irremediably relational' (2005: 177). I feel drawn to her song. An indiscernible voice whispers 'not yet', I press on.~~

~~I arrive at the building, climb the metal fire escape stairs on the outside passing the ground floor, home to an events company brandishing the slogan, 'the perfect location for your creation'. I continue to the fourth floor where views of the city of Brussels, in particular the shiny top of the spherical structure of the Atomium, constructed in the late 1950s for the 'World's Fair Exposition' (Expo 58) catches my eye. Traversing a grey painted hallway, I enter a semi-lit studio, the floor creaks sending echoes around the vast open space. Not the creak of a haunted house, a creak more akin to a worn-out warehouse, an overloaded and overworked dense chipboard flooring. I pause. A vast space full of redundant objects stretches before me: an unstable wooden seated sculpture of sorts, several large loudspeakers, wooden chairs, tables, a well-used sofa, a very small blue leather jacket (almost too small for anybody) and a mouldy coffee cup. I look at the space around me, which of all the objects in the room might be a sound installation?~~

~~'You are irreplaceable'~~

~~Sounds of plastic tubes moving.~~

~~(Breathing)~~

~~'This place'~~

~~'Hello'~~

~~(Singing) 'We are only yesterday...'~~

~~'Oh'~~

~~'Haha'~~

~~Sounds of plastic tubes moving.~~

~~'Is there someone new?'~~

~~'Haha, yeah'~~

~~'Ok'~~

~~'Ah'~~

~~'I recognize the voice'~~

~~'No'~~

~~'Yeah'~~

~~'So ...'~~

~~'Are you on the left side or on the right side?'~~

~~'Um, I have no idea'~~

~~'Middle?'~~

~~'I'm in, in something and not sure'~~

~~'Ah, ok'~~

~~'Hey?'~~

~~'I just see flowers when I look down and up, actually I can't look up'~~

~~Sound of plastic tubes moving.~~

~~Sound of creaking floorboards.~~

~~'Ooooooooooooo'~~

~~'Is there somebody else?'~~

~~Sound of creaking.~~

~~'No I'm all alone'~~

~~'HEY'~~

~~'Oh yeah, there is somebody'~~

~~'HEY, hehehe'~~

~~'Ah, yeah'~~

~~'HEEEEOOOO'~~

~~Sound engulfs, immerses, envelops me; it lends itself to interiority and intimacy as it is essentially mobile and contemporaneous, it arrives, attacks and surprises. Sound theorist Brandon LaBelle reminds me, sound 'explicitly brings bodies together' (2010: xxiv); it is a porous phenomenon connecting spaces and people.~~

~~=~~

~~I turn my head as my ear, struck by the sound of voices in the air, hears sounds emanating from a collection of objects; words, tones, obscure shapes and shadows become audible. Unsure of what, or who I am hearing, I am drawn away from the fourth floor vistas into relation with the voices.~~

~~'Help me, help'~~

~~(Low tone) 'ooohaaahooohhhh'~~

~~Scratching sounds.~~

~~'It is kind of confusing.'~~

~~'Help!'~~

~~'How are you doing today?'~~

~~(Low tone continues throughout)~~

~~'ooohaaahhooohahhhh'~~

~~Speaking over each other~~

~~'I'm very very very busy. I'm really very very busy.'~~

~~'Help me. Help.'~~

~~Scratching sounds of plastic tube~~

~~'Tttttttt'~~

~~Scratching sounds of plastic tube intensifies~~

~~'Help. It's black. Help me. Help me, please'~~

~~(Low tone fills the space.)~~

~~(Formal tone) 'I'm sorry but I am just really, really very very busy. Very, very busy. You just happened to call me in a very very busy moment and I really can't help.'~~

~~'Ttttttt'~~

~~'Not today, not today thank you.'~~

~~'Que es pasais?'~~

~~'Not today.'~~

~~Sounds of plastic tubes scraping~~

~~'This is the BBC home service broadcasting from...'~~

~~'Come es tampoco...'~~

~~'I need you'~~

~~HHMMMMMPPPHMMMMM~~

~~'Y el espiritu santo [...] Vamonos para casa [...] esas personas'~~

~~Hm hm hm ha hm hm ha~~

~~In the half light I make out the reflection of a corrugated metal tube. I see fragments of bodies; the legs of a person from the waist down sitting on a black office chair, their head obscured by a blue plastic baby's bath suspended, almost invisibly, by fishing wire.~~

~~I draw closer, some voices sound further away than others. I can't see any faces or locate the exact source of the sound. French film theorist and composer Michel Chion (1999) describes this effect, when voice and image do not match, as the acousmetre. Chion cites examples from cinema, such as the booming voice of the wizard in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), only to be revealed later as a little man with a large microphone. Though an effect we have now become widely accustomed to, in his seminal publication *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (1993), Chion notes how this is used to assign power and omnipotence, the all-seeing voice. In this case, however, the concealment of the source does not give a sense of omnipotence, more a sense of extended concealment. I cannot see exactly how the voice is~~

~~being channelled, my perceptive capacities are sustained, my obligation to endorse the world through language is extended through an inability to articulate the experience, thereby expanding and deferring the space of spectatorship. I linger.~~

~~I draw even closer. I see someone's legs, their upper body is wrapped in foam, they are concealed by a plastic shower curtain patterned with small blue, red, and yellow polka dots.~~

~~=~~

~~I am in front of an odd collection of leftover materials, far from their habitual function: a baby's bath, a yoga mat, a shower curtain, an upside down chair faking it as a sound umbrella, a piece of green carpet too small to occupy any room, an upside down bag, and a broken unzipped sleeping bag.~~

~~Towards the centre of the space there is a metal opening, I am drawn to it, I rest my ear on the edge of the corrugated material. I feel the heat of voices, a human warmth that touches me on the ear, not like a warm breeze but something more rancid, a wet warmth fragrant with coffee and cigarettes.~~

~~=~~

~~The metal opening is dark and obscure inside, like the opening to a mouth or a cave. I look deep into it and try to trace the origin of the voices; my gaze is met with a void. There are some pieces of corrugated iron attached to its sides that open like a set of lips. I follow the tube with my eyes; it is almost like a throat. It reaches up toward the ceiling and splits into several red ribbed plastic pipes. Again, I trace it with my eye, each tube seems to feed into one of the areas of amassed objects in the room.~~

~~A black boot from under a green hillock like carpet construction moves backwards, a shin, a knee, another black boot, shin, knee, thigh emerges, waist, chest, arms, head. I draw closer to the area the boot emerged from. On all fours I push the flap of carpet aside and poke my head in, I pull myself inside by putting pressure on my elbows and enter into a kind of dark black box. I rest my upper body on the soft material consisting of duvets and foam, I bring my knees to my chest to make space for myself and lie for a while, completely motionless, comforted by the material surrounding me. It is almost completely dark and there is a strong smell of rubber.~~

~~'This is for you', a plastic tube is handed to me.~~

Holding the plastic tube in my hand, I press it to my ear to hear the fragmented sounds and voices of others. The tube vibrates and becomes warm in my hand. I move the opening to my mouth unsure of what to say.

There is no task or instruction.

~~-~~

I cannot see the faces of my interlocutors suspending any ethical responsibility to make sense or construct a relation. I am unsure of what I might want to say, my self interest suppressed in this setting.

The staged objects seem to have been robbed of what art historian Grant Kester refers to as their 'aesthetic contemplation' (2004: 29); they are assigned other values as their potential

for transformation has been exploited. In *Conversation Pieces* (2004), Kester claims we see objects in terms of self-transformation, asking ourselves questions such as: can I sell it? Can I eat it? He muses that this might also hold true for relationships with people. Kester argues that robbing an object of its specificity allows you to see its potential for transformation. Similarly here, through a suspension of habitual dialogical relations, possible grounds are created for the experimentation of existence, perhaps opening the possibility for self-transformation.

As the voice comes into distinct approximations with other surfaces, relationships can alter. Philosopher and cultural theorist Mladen Dolar (2006) notes how the sound of your own voice, when heard on a recording device, causes an uncanny relationship to arise.

Here, in this semi-echoic box my attention is focused on the possibility to either speak or to listen; I cannot do both simultaneously but must choose between one and the other. If I speak into the tube, I cannot hear the sound of my own voice. In this space, the deadened walls reduce the amount of reverb that would usually return the sound to my ears. I put words out into the tube with little or no notion of where they go, what they might sound like, who they might affect and how. Iiiiiii speak into the sssspace in front of me and hear my voice hit the soft walls all around. I listen, sounds emerge from the red plastic tube in my hand. I listen. I hear my own heartbeat and become increasingly aware of the space my body takes up. There is no pressure to participate or to speak.

I linger inside the structure, content to receive and emit sounds, using my voice as an instrument, without any particular need or want.

-

I move the rough edge of the plastic tube to my mouth and whisper something about the dark. I move it back to my ear and hear someone asking if I am alright repeatedly. Someone else answers over my words. I send out a 'help me' request in a voice slightly higher pitched than usual and receive what sounds like a national railway announcement in return.

-

A low hum [...] mmmmmh, a low hummmmmmmh.

I give up trying to communicate or to speak to anyone. I feel the tube vibrate, I draw my mouth close adding my own voice to the vibrations.

-

The voices grow in volume, the pitch alters to accommodate my sound.

Sense and nonsense mingle, meaning-making and communication are not the objective as we become more involved in feeling vibrations affected by different sounds in our mouths and in the tube. The sound of the word is responded to as opposed to the content, making the materiality of words more palpable.

Figure 15: *A space for being opens. The hum grows and alters; it carves a shifting relational landscape between us, covering areas we can negotiate together without a pre-agreed trajectory to follow. It is 'no longer a question of intercepting a sound and decoding or interpreting it, but rather of responding to a unique voice that signifies nothing but itself' (Cavarero 2005: 7). We join together in sound, in what Philosopher Adriana Cavarero describes as 'the maintenance of a relation that communicates no other meaning than the*

~~relation itself' (ibid.: 195). There is no intention to communicate or to make sense. We are not only connected through sound but also via the red-ribbed plastic tube vibrating in our hands. We are a shifting-sonorous landscape that puts us in common outside the voicing of language verging on 'dangerously bodily, if not seductive or quasi-animal' (ibid.: 13). A space for being opens, a space for vocal theatre that as soon as the mouth closes, is gone.~~

Findings: Experiment I

Lingering is introduced as a way of extending and expanding my attention to relations with voices, beings, and objects within a space, yet the possibility to listen away so as not to hear or to engage with the event also emerges. Feminist and queer studies theorist Sara Ahmed asks, 'What difference does it make what we are oriented toward?' (2006: 543), claiming 'we are not only directed toward objects, but those objects also take us in a certain direction' (ibid.: 544). Following Ahmed through this practical investigation, I begin to understand aural attention as an orientation (or aorientation) toward phenomenon cultivated by a turn towards atmospheric properties and affectful non-linguistic elements of the voice. It therefore seems that bodies take shape and are shaped by how they are aurally affected. ~~is a phenomenon able to shape and choreograph our attentional focus.~~ Aural attention, evidences its ability to act on the body's trajectory within a space, shifting, and altering relations between people, places, and things.

In attuning my attention to what is aurally available, rather than solely focusing on semantic content, I become aware of how sounds, beyond their linguistic value, act on, and influence the movement and direction of my body within the space. Beyond words, sounds carve an atmosphere that either accompanies, or is incongruent to the words spoken. Outside attention to linguistic units or semantic meaning, aural attention provides direction, though at times almost imperceptible, it shapes and organizes my experience of space.

In *Experiment II: Vibrant Practice*, I focus on how sonorous relations might occur on a vibrational level that can be tangibly felt. To do so, I leave the city studio space in Brussels behind and head out into the landscape of Mid West Wales.

Note

I am grateful to the artists whose voices feature on the audio recordings. These include Sylvain Boisvert, Charo Calvo, Alessandra Coppola, Dolores, Robin Amanda Creswell Faure, Fleur Khani, Nibia Pastrana Santiago, Carlotta Scioldo, Bart van den Eynde, and Dianne Weller.

Experiments in Aural Attention II: Vibrant Practice

Figure 16: [Video] I walk across small concrete bridges.

I walk across small concrete bridges, snow-filled fields, mud-encrusted paths and overgrown forests. I see sheep with their lambs in a futile search for grass in a frozen landscape. I lose my bearings, stray off the path, encounter ditches, rams' skulls and various types of moss and lichen.

In 2013, three artists, Naomi Heath, Jane Lloyd-Francis, and ~~I Rebecca Collins~~ under the name, Performance-in Practice (PiP), met on a weekly basis at Aberystwyth Arts Centre in Wales to share and engage in developing practice as research. Each of us had a common interest and passion for walking, the Welsh landscape, and perception. ~~After Following~~ an initial number of weeks sharing practical tasks and materials, we embarked together on *Listening to Water*.

~~For this investigation,~~ Heath, Lloyd-Francis, and I spent several months locating and visiting ancient well sites in Ceredigion and Powys, counties in Mid West Wales. The visits included trips to Ffynnon Badarn (Saint Badarn's Well), Llanafan Fawr, Ffynnonau Penegeoes, Ffynon Tyfi and St Cadfan's ~~(see Figures 20 and 21)~~. The practice investigated sensory connections to the landscape and questioned how a listening practice might inform our sense of place. In the practical explorations I sought to explore how listening, as a practice, can move away from solely being conducted by the ear to be a practice undertaken with the whole body. I wanted to explore how attention is shaped by resonances, vibrations, and forms of intuition. I describe this as a vibrant practice.

Figure 17: [Video] The futility of marking it with its own name.

The futility of marking it with its own name — how to make it heard as it sits there silently next to the road — holding its holy silence. Tongue-tied, tangled up in the weeds and brambles. How might its silence draw attention to its presence, might it learn to speak the language of the century through faith tourism, or might it hold its early secrets for those who turn their attention.

~~A live version of *Listening to Water* was staged in the Round Studio at Aberystwyth Arts Centre on 30 May 2013. This included digital projection mapping of video documentation, spoken text, choreography, and an edited audio track from our excursions into the landscape combining field recordings, and writing developed from field notes.~~

~~A site-specific version of *Listening to Water* was commissioned for the Green Man Festival in Wales. The audio track featured as part of 'Intermission: Audio Portraits of Place — Mapping the Air Space Between A-B' curated by Echoes and Jenny Savage for STRESS.FM at the Lisbon Architecture Triennale. This formed part of a wider investigation into how field recording can inform architecture.~~

~~In 2015, following a series of trials with an underwater transducer speaker, the type habitually used in spas to pipe soothing music to bathers, I used the audio track to make a sound installation. In this format I was keen to underscore further the vibrant properties of the practice and sought to bring about a sensorial experience in the gallery space. The underwater speaker has a top plate which, when submerged, causes the upper layer of the water to produce a ripple. Certain sounds, when played through the speaker, such as plosives and fricatives, generate a greater vibrational force agitating the water on the surface. For the installation, different shades of green glitter were applied to the surface of the water which then moved in reaction to the vibrational waves caused by the speaker (see Figure 22). This version of the work was shown at Aberystwyth School of Art Gallery in the~~

context of 'Experiments in Aural Attention: Linger Longer & Listening Away' (2015). See the following pages for video documentation and images from the exhibition.

Subsequently, the piece toured to The Peter Scott Gallery in Lancaster as part of the *Women in Sound Women on Sound* symposium in 2015. For each iteration, gallery goers were invited to lie on lavender oil infused cushions on the floor next to the structure whilst watching the reflection of the water as it moved on the ceiling. In 2020, the work featured on *Ars Sonora*, a specialist sound art programme for Spanish National Radio.

~~I walk across small concrete bridges, snow-filled fields, mud-encrusted paths and overgrown forests. I see sheep with their lambs in a futile search for grass in a frozen landscape. I lose my bearings, stray off the path, encounter ditches, rams' skulls and various types of moss and lichen.~~

Vibrant practice

Vibrant practice is the term I am using to describe the process used to gather and develop materials for *Listening to Water* in its various iterations as Heath, Lloyd Francis, and I walked through the Welsh landscape.

This mode of working describes a form of attention shaped by attitudes that are cultivated over time and sensitive to the landscape, to found objects, and to natural phenomena observed by each of us on each site visit. This position is informed by political theorist and philosopher Jane Bennett who, writing on vital materialism, states, 'an anthropomorphic element in perception can uncover a whole world of resonances and resemblances — sounds and sights that echo and bounce far more than would be possible were the universe to have a hierarchical structure' (2010: 99).

This horizontal position incorporates an awareness of how inanimate and animate entities are entangled, and informs the approach taken by the three of us recognizing, following Spinoza, that all things are animate 'albeit in different degrees' (cited in Bennett 2010: 5).

By attuning to the landscape, and to our bodies' response to what we encounter, we also aim to cultivate a historiographic sensing inspired by Diane Ackerman's writing in *A Natural History of the Senses*, who writes, 'What is most amazing is not how our senses span distance or cultures, but how they span time. Our senses connect us intimately to the past, connect us in ways that most of our cherished ideas never could' (1991: xvi).

Figure 18: [Video] Fabric Billowing

Fabric billowing, my watery shadow reflected in the ancient waters. Thousands of tadpoles surface to see the spectacle as their world altered.

Such pasts are never uncomplicated as evident in human geographer Kathleen Stewart's writing on the post-industrial landscapes of West Virginia. Stewart invites the reader of 'An Occupied Place' to '[i]magine a place grown intensely local in the face of loss, displacement,

exile, and a perpetually deferred desire to return always already lost or still ahead, just beyond reach' (1996: 16).

Elsewhere in her writing Stewart underscores the importance of poetics for writing-evoking an essence of into and about the 'things that happen' (2010: 78138) to avoid banalizing the complex critical textures found in the nuances of daily ongoings by alluding to abstract, unspecific, and distant (or grandiose) explanations. Whilst micro-observations of an attitude, an atmosphere, and the circulation of affect are inevitably caught up in macro shifts occurring as industrial activities wane, palpable shifts, signs, and fleeting moments all deserve due attention and analysis.

A vibrant practice is responsive, requiring each of us to be open to the environment, and to what we might find on each of our excursions, leaving behind any preconceptions. The communication of feelings and sensations, detected on each walk undertaken was a core element in this work.

Finally, a vibrant practice is committed to an exploration of the limits and possibilities of perceptive faculties, via performance, to poetic/performative writing registers. Following each excursion, dedicated studio time enabled the three of us to embark on an exploration of materials; dried leaves, green moss, sticks, water, poetic writing, and movement to share the limits and possibilities of our encounters. This echoes the sentiments of writer and dramaturg Matthew Goulish who, in reference to the presence of the extraordinary within the ordinary, states how 'performance figures in our dialogue as a set of practices that enact, or reenact, or articulate duration's multiplicity as live or as lived: *to show us that an extension of the faculties of perception is possible*; possibility, let us say, that allows space of mind, or at the very least, latitude' (2009: 132).^[RC2]

To this end, in the writing that follows, the third person is deployed here to emulate the plurality of perspectives and perceptive accounts generated whilst also putting some critical distance on the practice and shifting the register from what might otherwise read as an autobiographical or personal account. Text from field trips appears alongside images and audio recordings developed throughout the duration of the investigation.

Three figures

Figure 19: The three figures

Audio 5: Following the ancient

The three figures walk, chattering in an excited manner about mundane details of last night's dinner, unable to notice much outside their own selves. Mouths occupied with the business of language, dominated by a need to classify and make sense of experience. This is not dissimilar to how philosopher Michel Serres in *The Five Senses* remarks on the anaesthetizing effects of language, as a noisy group descends, interrupting his moment of solitude as he reclines against the steps at Epidaurus.

The group, or hullabaloo, arrives shrouded in language that operates like an all-encompassing vehicle: shouting, talking, squawking, reading extracts from guidebooks, pointing, laughing, discussing. Such behaviour causes Serres to ask: what is it that they really saw or experienced? Serres's remarks point to lack of attunement to the present locality in which such a group finds themselves. The place and its circumstances seem unimportant in the rushed attempt to make sense and categorize. Language, Serres claims, is an addiction; it is 'the stingy dope' to which we have given ourselves, it is a tool of analysis, one capable of destructing the variables to which our senses are attentive (2008: 9).

Following Serres, and in relation to this vibrant practice, it might therefore be necessary to consider the body's experience in the world as porous, one through which sensorial understanding is not merely confined to strict meanings found in the exact utterances of language, but one sensitive to the potentially more subtle, vibratory character detectable in the matter of the world.

As the three figures walk, they become stiller, quieter, slowing to another rhythm, more attuned to their surroundings, seeking silence in the land and in each other's company. Their bodies move in unison, fatigued by the uphill curve of the terrain. They move from the relatively soft (slightly frozen) ground, to a pathway of dense, dried leaves, though at the time this is barely registered. Their chatter dies down; the pace slackens, becoming more in-sync with their surroundings. A fallen tree obstructs the path, a red kite circles above and beyond the canopy of trees, the foliage underfoot grows gradually less crisp and somewhat moist. They stop, turning themselves from the path of leaves stretched out in front, toward that which is just off the path. Their attention shifts, the motivation is unclear. Don Ihde has noted, in relation to auditory engagement, that 'focal phenomena can be selected such that other focal phenomena become background or fringe phenomena' (2007: 74). As examples, Ihde cites the city dweller, able to hear a coin drop on the train platform even as a train approaches, or the jungle habitant able to hear the whisper of the adder, despite the chatter of the monkeys (ibid.). During the excursions, something equivalent to a shift in auditory focal attention occurs, as the three figures are re-orientated from what lies directly in front of them, toward that which is just off to the side of the path.

As Rei Terada suggests: 'To be told what to perceive is to be told what not to look at, and when to cut a look short; it's also to be told where to look — to maintain one's focus on the things that matter' (2009: 200–01).

Temporary vital materialists

Figure 20: They begin to generate a sensitivity and understanding to the well's affective and performative qualities

Audio 6: I do no write

Turning away from the path the three figures actively disorient themselves from the main route, allowing their attention to be shaped by whatever comes next. It is anthropologist Keith H. Basso who suggests that the 'experience of sensing places' is 'roundly reciprocal

and incorrigibly dynamic' (1996: 55), whereas anthropologist Steven Feld notes how 'sound both emanates from and penetrates bodies; this reciprocity of reflection and absorption is a creative means of orientation — one that tunes bodies to places and times through their sounding potential' (2003: 226).

A place then, can be considered as an area animated by the ideas and feelings of those who attend to them. Further to this, a place itself can, in turn, be animated by the ideas and attention bestowed on it. Basso notes, via Satre, how forms of attention fostered between subjects and objects enable places to obtain a field of meaning. Basso claims 'even in total stillness, places may seem to speak' (1996: 56). Yet, they are only enabled to speak to the extent that those who place their attention on them allow them to. Basso further states how 'places also provide points from which to look out on life, to grasp one's position in the order of things, to contemplate from somewhere in particular' (ibid.).

Despite the indication in Basso's account that objects and places might play a role in how attention is shaped and informed, it seems that, from his account, this ultimately serves the human figure to situate their perceptive faculties in relation to their position in the world.

Returning to Bennett's ecology of vibrational relations in *Vibrant Matter* (2010), a notable shift in positions arises. Bennett, the three figures remind themselves, argues for the human body as merely another component within the vibrational event of life thereby diminishing boundaries between human and non-human entities. This is evident in their attentiveness to the well's 'thing-power' and the contemplation of their shared material vitality (ibid.: 17). Such a state, as described by Bennett, avoids making any concrete claims and instead attempts to look for points of commonality.

This position, they realize, resonates with Terada's description of the figure of the phenomenophile as the lingering state they are experiencing expresses dissatisfaction with how the world is classified.

~~The futility of marking it with its own name — how to make it heard as it sits there silently next to the road — holding its holy silence. Tongue tied, tangled up in the weeds and brambles. How might its silence draw attention to its presence, might it learn to speak the language of the century through faith tourism, or might it hold its early secrets for those who turn their attention —~~

Once there, in front of the well, they stumble closer towards it, feet squelching in the mud beneath them. They reach clumsily, hurriedly, to take photographs and record its sound. The well sits there, seemingly unmoved, concealed in the woods, ivy creeping around its mouth, small green plants protruding. Their turn toward the well initiates a naiveté, one that slows and arrests their previous chattering state. They linger, fascinated by the object before them, trying to absorb, exhaust, document, engage, understand, empathize, witness. Attuning to the presence of this natural feature, in turn, they each tune out of personal disquietudes into something of another order, something no longer of immediate importance or significance. By focusing their attention, they, in turn, begin to generate a sensitivity and understanding of the well's affective and performative qualities.

Configurations of concrete things?

As the three figures make journeys to several well sites — Abecegir, Llanbadarn, Penglais, Llanafan — they generate a collection of glass bottles, animal skulls, dried leaves, mosses, fleeces, branches, and tree bark all discovered en route, or at each site.

Not only do they experience attunement through their re-orientation toward the landscape, but also towards the gathering of particular objects, in their presence. They make sense of these things as though the objects were put there in a certain combination for them to order.

They become more susceptible to other resonances and frequencies operating on and through what they encounter that might otherwise pass them by.

They share an unspoken vocabulary of common experiences, the objects house their stories, map their journeys, their relation to each other, and to the land they have walked through.

Their significance exceeds their semantic value — these everyday objects, materials, and substances seem to take on other qualities as they are used, touched, and passed around.

As philosopher Jeff Malpas has argued, the environing world, 'umwelt', is one in which things have a certain place within the environment and in relation to other animate and inanimate beings.

The world is not therefore encountered as a set of causes, ideas, or impressions, but as a set of concrete things (2006: 55) implying that there is always a certain direction or orientation governing our relations, providing a situatedness towards one's surroundings.

Yet, if a certain configuration is always already implied, how might we experience or encounter objects, the landscape, each other, outside this already established order of things?

~~Fabric billowing, my watery shadow reflected in the ancient waters. Thousands of tadpoles surface to see the spectacle as their world altered.~~

Encounters with objects found within each outdoor setting led the three figures to reconsider their status as objects to that of things. Though it might be argued that these objects are typical to any woodland journey, for them it was this skull as opposed to any skull.

This feeling is reminiscent of the distinction Jane Bennett makes between 'it, thing' over 'us, being' as she attempts to illustrate 'the extent to which the us and the it slip-slide into each other' (2010: 4). In a bid to 'enhance the receptivity to the impersonal life that surrounds and infuses us' (ibid.), Bennett describes how the combination of a dead rat, a plastic bottle cap, and a black glove reveal their 'thing-power' (ibid.), and in doing so arrive into view as a 'contingent tableau' (ibid.: 5) as their assemblage in the gutter exhausts their semiotic capacities, appearing outside the habitual contexts set by human subjects (ibid.: 17).

Not dissimilar, each object in their collection had, in some way, surprised them in their discovery of it; though dead matter, the encounter was 'vibratory'. These configurations reveal particular aspects of the world in conjunction with what they are seen next to and to what is in the sensorial frame.

If we are, as Michel Serres has suggested, 'body-box, strung tight [...] covered head to toe with a tympanum' (2008: 141), then might it be our attunement to certain resonances or vibrancies that allow different shades of the world and its objects to reveal themselves?

Figure 21: [\[Video\] We continue along the road.](#)

We continue along the road, our attention is drawn quite directly and easily to the rusted metal pipe and white bucket modification catching all the water underneath — not so far off the beaten track this time. The birdsong louder here — a proud place — the cleaning brush evidences this well has a twenty-first century guardian of some kind.

Findings: ~~Vibrant practice~~ [Experiment II](#)

Following this vibrant practice, it seems that an apprehension of the world and its objects might better be described in terms of a kind of listening, a sensorial engagement, one that relates to 'our whole body' as it 'vibrates in unison with the stimulus', where '[h]earing is, like all sense perception, a way of seizing reality with all our body, including our bones and viscera' (Gonzalez-Crussi 1989: 45 cited in Feld 1996: 96).

By attuning to the frequencies and rhythms of other non-human beings and inanimate objects, a proximity that is somehow subtler, yet more entwined than the demonstrative relations suggested in our clumsy reliance on whole linguistic units, is experienced. By focusing on listening, it becomes less important to uncover a meaning that takes the form of an exact utterance, as a longer, more drawn out attentive engagement is suggested. Listening and aural attention therefore emerge as modes that push beyond the mere 'making sense' of what is heard.

Through the vibrant practice, it becomes clear that to become aware or to acknowledge the micro-movements and vibrations in operation around us, it is necessary to cultivate a predisposition to our encounters with other people, places, or things so as to already generate sensitivity to the pre-signifying affective forces in operation. How we access and approach such operations requires a gradual process built up over time. It would seem that sensorial approximations exploit and recognize the body as tympanum. Pulse, pace, and rhythm are not coincidental conditions of being but intrinsic to our porous relation to the environment and our surroundings.

Conclusion

~~By writing and practising aural attention, I have sought to demonstrate how access can be gained to temporary lived environments where the attentive focus is directed and shaped~~

beyond the mere surface qualities of representation to recover a sense of how something is and what something is like within the depths of its presentation. As outlined in the introduction, in doing so, I sought to build on Home Cook's articulation of aural attention as being more than something we merely do to being considered as 'an 'act' that does something: how we listen phenomenologically affects our perception of what we hear' (2015: 168). Experiments I and II have, through embodied and phenomenological forms, engaged practically with this proposition.

In experiment I, by funnelling sound through assemblages of everyday objects in unusual ways, gallery-goers were invited to comprehend their engagement with aurality in a mode outside habitual encounters. The act of engaging in aural attention — a mode of being characterized by lingering longer — the gallery-goer engages with the depth, texture, and possibility of the installation pieces and their objects rather than retaining a surface relationship that might limit appreciation of the work to its role as an aesthetic object.

In experiment II, by pursuing a writing practice that prioritizes aural attention, the micro-movements, and vibrations in operation within language are brought into the foreground amplifying, extending, and making tangible the affective forces occurring in the moment in which phenomenal experiences are taking place. The use of third person within the writing provided insight into how such relations gradually unfold between beings revealing a becoming relation, one that draws attention to the relationships in operation between the animate and inanimate, indicating how we are connected and how aurally constituted frameworks might alter our relationship to the environment.

At stake in this investigation is the recognition that our experience of the world, characterized through a depth of engagement, is not limited to how relations operate on the surface. Where attention is put, the intensity with which it is applied, how it weighs on and shapes our experience implies choice and agency within what is otherwise presented as 'given'. Therefore, within the exposition, there is both a political as well as ethical dimension. The political emerges through the possibility to turn towards, or away from what might otherwise be described as a dominant mode of being in the world. Ulterior modes of attending such as lingering longer or listening away bring forth an ethical dimension. By suspending habitual modes of being, a certain freedom arises from those associated with that which already exists.

Bibliography

- Ackerman, Diane. 1991. *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York, NY: Vintage Books)
- Ahmed, Sara. 2006. 'Orientations: Toward a queer phenomenology', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 12.4: 543–74
- Arvidson, P. Sven. 2006. *The Sphere of Attention Context and Margin* (Dordrecht: Springer)
- Basó, Keith Hamilton. 1996. *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press)

Belinfante, Sam. 2014. 'Listening, Curated by Sam Belinfante', exhibition at BALTIC 39 for Hayward Touring Curatorial Open, Newcastle
<<https://www.sambelinfante.com/work/listening/>> [accessed 13 July 2022]

Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press)

Cavarero, Adriana. 2005. *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press)

Chion, Michel. 1999. *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. by Claudia Gorbman (New York, NY: Columbia University Press)

~~Collins, Rebecca. 2021. 'Aural Attunement is a Form of Performative Writing Used to Write about Nonhuman Affective Relations in Emma Bennett's "Slideshow Birdshow"' *Ambiances International Journal of Sensory Environment, Architecture and Urban Space*, 7, Vol. 2 <<https://doi.org/10.4000/ambiances.4047>> [accessed: 13 July 2022]~~

~~———. 2019. 'Stolen Voices Is a Slowly Unfolding Eavesdrop on the East Coast of the UK', *Arts*, 8.4: 140~~

~~Collins, Rebecca and Johanna Linsley. 2019. 'Stolen Voices', *ASAP/J the open access platform of ASAP/Journal* <<https://asapjournal.com/stolen-voices-rebecca-collins-and-johanna-linsley/>> [accessed 29 May 2021]~~

Dolar, Mladen. 2006. *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press)

Drobnick, Jim (ed.). 2004. *Aural Cultures* (Toronto: YYZ Books)

Feld, Steven. 2003. 'A rainforest acoustemology', in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, ed. by Michael Bull and Les Back (Oxford: Berg Publishers), pp.223-239

Goodman, Steve. 2009. *Sonic Warfare* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press)

Goulish, Matthew and Laura Cull. 2009. 'sub specie durationis', in *Deleuze and Performance*, ed. by Laura Cull (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), pp.126-147

Groth, Sanne Krogh and Holger Schulze. 2020. *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sound Art* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury)

Home-Cook, George. 2015. *Theatre and Aural Attention: Stretching Ourselves* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan)

Ihde, Don. 2007. *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*. 2nd edition. (Albany: State University of New York Press)

Kester, Grant H. 2004. *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press)

Labelle, Brandon. 2010. *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life* (London: Continuum)

London, Barbara. 2013. 'Soundings: A Contemporary Score', exhibition, MoMA, New York <<https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1351>> [accessed 28 May 2021]

Malpas, Jeff E. 2008. *Heidegger's Topology: Being, Place, World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press)

Noë, Alva. 2004. *Action in Perception* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press)

Patrice Pavis. 2011. 'Preface', in *Theatre Noise: The Sound of Performance*, ed. by Lynne Kendrick and David Roesner (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing), pp.x-xiv

- Rancière, Jacques. 2005. *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. by Gabriel Rockill (London: Bloomsbury)
- Serres, Michel. 2008. *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* (London: Continuum)
- Shapiro, Michael J. 2013. *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn* (New York, NY: Routledge)
- Stewart, Kathleen. 1996. 'An Occupied Place', in *Senses of Place*, ed. by Steven Feld and Keith Basso (Santa Fe: School of American Research), pp. 137-166
- —. 2008. 'Weak Theory in an Unfinished World', *Journal of Folklore Research*, 45.1
- Terada, Rei. 2009. *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press)
- Voegelin, Salomé. 2013. *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* (London: Bloomsbury)